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Fred Thompson, Courting Celebrity

The Watergate Lawyer
Takes a Star Turn in 'Marie'

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You know you've seen that mug somewhere before as it looms several feet high on the movie screen. The brooding eyes under heavy brows, the full lips contemptuously curled as he badgers the witness. Obviously some character actor, but what's his name? Then the credits role: Fred Thompson, played by "Himself."

"Himself" looks familiar because he *is* familiar. As minority counsel to the Senate select committee on Watergate, Fred Thompson came into living rooms across the nation via TV, along with lawyer Sam Dash, senators Howard Baker, Sam Ervin and an unforgettable supporting cast. In reel life, Thompson plays Sissy Spacek's lawyer in "Marie: A True Story." In real life, Thompson, who went back to Tennessee to practice law following Watergate, successfully defended Marie Ragghianti, a young political appointee, against unlawful dismissal by then-Tennessee governor Ray Blanton. The successful trial triggered an investigation that ended up with Blanton and aides in jail, led to a book about Marie and now the movie.

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Critics call Thompson a Republican gun for hire. In addition to Watergate, Thompson was special counsel to the Republican-run Senate Foreign Relations Committee for Alexander Haig's confirmation hearings and counsel for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence for the probe of CIA Director William J. Casey's financial investments. The panel was critical of Casey for withholding information from the committee, but found him "not unfit" to serve his post.

Thompson shrugs at criticism that he was too much a Republican advocate. "Sure people are always going to say stuff about Republican partisanship—it's like the fox guarding the henhouse." So let 'em. I think too much of myself to do that."

As for Watergate, Thompson says, if he had it to do over again, "I would be *more* of an advocate instead of less. If you had a Republican-controlled Senate investigating a Democratic

administration I would feel it incumbent on that minority counsel to make sure Democratic officials got a fair shake." Thompson still complains that the Democrats tried, among other things, to "set up" then-Nixon speech-

writer Pat Buchanan. "They told him they had given him all the documents they were going to question him on. I found out they didn't and I called Pat at home that night and told him what was coming. And he ate 'em alive the next day. I fault myself for not being aggressive enough from time to time because of the overwhelming press sentiment." As an unseasoned 30-year-old, says Thompson, "in my heart of hearts I knew the criticism I would receive if I was any tougher than I was."

He also "had to be dragged kicking and screaming into reality on some of this stuff." He shakes his head remembering his first reaction to Alexander Butterfield's bombshell that Nixon had taped White House conversations—tapes that ultimately brought the president down: "It had occurred to me those tapes would still not be around over there if they hurt the president and maybe he had sent Butterfield over there to disclose that. Nixon, the wily old fox that he was, maybe arranged the whole thing."

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